



**Lesbian Elders Oral Herstory
of
Pat Cohen**

An Interview
Conducted by
Morgan Grey
12/29/2022

Collection: The Lesbian Elders Oral Herstory Project

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Supported by a two-year Mellon-funded Community Archives grant, LHA is facilitating The Lesbian Elders Oral Herstory Project which seeks to continue the Lesbian Herstory Archives' commitment to collecting and sharing all Lesbian stories.

LEOHP Interview

Interviewee: Pat Cohen

Interviewer: Morgan Grey

Date: 12/29/2022

Pat Cohen 00:00

[unclear]

Morgan Grey 00:02

All right, we're official. So hello, thank you for joining me. Today is Thursday, December 29, 2022. And we're recording an oral history with me, Morgan Grey, talking to Pat Cohen about her life history. This is a Lesbian Elders Oral Herstory Project interview, a project of the Lesbian Herstory Archives. And we are recording from Pat's home in Gulfport, Florida, and my home in Salem, Oregon. So welcome, Pat, thank you so much for volunteering to be interviewed for this project.

Pat Cohen 00:38

Good. I'm glad to do it.

Morgan Grey 00:40

Yeah! So let's start by just talking some about your early life. Get a picture of where you came from. So, when and where were you born?

Pat Cohen 00:51

I was born in New York City, Brooklyn, New York. They called it East New York section.

Morgan Grey 00:58

Okay, when?

Pat Cohen 01:00

Oh, 1943. July 29, 1943. So I was a war baby.

Morgan Grey 01:06

Okay, was your father a soldier?

Pat Cohen 01:09

No, he was not. He was—he was 4F because he had polio as a child.

Morgan Grey 01:14

Ah, so many people did. Yeah.

Pat Cohen 01:16

Yeah, back then.

Morgan Grey 01:18

Yeah. What was your family like?

Pat Cohen 01:20

My family, I'm the middle girl of three girls. My oldest sister is three years older than me. My younger sister was born seven years after me. So it was, we were kind of a working class at that time. You know, and I mean, not that I knew what that was. But we had a two bedroom apartment in Brooklyn, and we had a television and, you know, so it was, you know, we thought we had everything [laughs]. But we had a car. My dad had a job. My mom stayed home with us. So we didn't know any better.

Morgan Grey 02:03

Okay, so when did you move out to Long Island?

Pat Cohen 02:06

I was seven. We moved out—well, first we moved to Forest Hills, Queens, there's a, what I call the Jewish migration pattern in New York, you know, Brooklyn, Queens, and then move out to Long Island because as people, you know, get better jobs and make more money, that's kind of the progression that it is. So I was about eight years old when I moved to Queens. And in 1952, we moved to Long Island. So I was like, 10, nine or 10. And that's when I moved there. And I started fifth grade in Mrs. Trembly's class. At number five school in Cedarhurst.

Morgan Grey 02:49

And when did you graduate from high school?

Pat Cohen 02:51

Graduated in high school in 1961. Lawrence High School.

Morgan Grey 02:54

And what did you do, immediately after high school?

Pat Cohen 03:00

Um, I went to college, I went to a Fashion Institute for a little while, about, you know, three months, and then it really wasn't for me. At that time I was also living at the Martha Washington Hotel, living in Manhattan, which was—they didn't have any dorms at that time so that's where

they put you and it was, it was interesting, because there were a lot of characters in the hotel. It was a woman's hotel. So there were police officers. And, you know, lady detectives. I mean, that was so exciting to me. And it was a group of people from, you know, not necessarily from New York, my roommate was from near the Buffalo area. And I had never met anybody from upstate and you know, Buffalo area, you know. So that was interesting.

I left and told my family I didn't want to continue with college. So I went and got a job. I got a job in Manhattan in the Garment District. And I worked there for a couple of years. And then I was laid off and then I, you know, did some part-time work. But the next job I had was working for American Airlines in 1963. I got a job there. I thought it was great, because I was going to have all the travel benefits. But really what was great about it was that there was a lot of diversity in the people that work there. And I made a lot of really good friends. And—yeah.

Morgan Grey 04:28

How was that significant for you, the diversity that you encountered in American Airlines?

Pat Cohen 04:34

Well, I had grown up in Woodmere, which was really, you know, upper-middle class, Jewish neighborhood. Everybody was the same. This being the Christmas season, believe me, we never saw a light. We didn't know anything about it. It was just really like an enclave that was, nobody was different. We were all alike, the same. We saw anybody that was different, you know, we definitely—I mean, my school was definitely integrated and there was another section of the Five Towns, which is where I grew up, that was, you know, Italian and African American. But you know, we didn't socialize with those people. We went to school with those people, you know, it was really—we stayed in cliques of everybody like, being like us.

So when I went to American Airlines, you know, you're an adult now and the people who are sitting next to you could be from—especially because it was people who work for the airlines—many of them are international. So there was a Scottish woman next to me, there was, you know, a lesbian next to me, there was an Italian woman behind me, you know, it was just very different. And it was eye-opening. It was like all, a lot of stereotypes that I had, throughout my life, dissipated almost immediately. And it was very rewarding. It was very eye-opening, it felt really good to, you know, see the rest of the world even if I didn't have to leave my desk.

Morgan Grey 06:02

How long did you work for American Airlines?

Pat Cohen 06:04

I worked there for seven years.

Morgan Grey 06:08

And what did, what happened when you left there?

Pat Cohen 06:13

When I left there, I was pregnant. I got—the reason I left is I had gotten married a year after I started working there. And six years later, I was pregnant. So I had a baby. And, you know, I kind of, you know, I was commuting from Long Island to Manhattan, that was, could have been like an eight o'clock, six, or seven-thirty in the morning. It was a good hour and a half commute. So I just figured I didn't have to, I wouldn't be working at least not while, you know, my son was little. So I resigned from the position. They gave you a year off. And then I had a year to decide that and I decided not to go back to work.

Morgan Grey 06:54

So tell me a little bit about your marriage and motherhood.

Pat Cohen 07:00

Ah, well, my marriage was—I married my childhood sweetheart, somebody who I had dated for four years. And probably the only reason I got married was because my mother said it was time. Because I had been with him for three or four years. She said it was time to get married. So okay, that sounds like a good idea. And he was nice, but a very passive person. After we were married he—the TV was on watching baseball game every night. And it was kind of boring. So I stayed in the marriage, although I had come out with somebody from American Airlines. I had come out, you know, not really out into the world, not publicly, but I was, I was a lesbian. I was in love with a woman, you know, and I was doing things while he was watching television and baseball.

I was going to the city to lesbian bars. And I had my son—one of the reasons I had a son, or one of the reasons I stayed in the marriage, because in 19—in the sixties, the Vietnam War was going on. And if you didn't—well, first it was if you weren't married, you could be drafted. So we got married. If you were, didn't have a kid, you could be drafted. So I went ahead, so I had a kid. And finally, when he was called, even though we had a kid, he was over 26, he went down there, and they kind of laughed at him and said, “You're too old. We can't take you”. And they sent him home. And by that time I was, you know, like a month pregnant. I didn't even know it. But I was. So I stayed in the marriage. Even though I had a series of affairs, I guess, I was with a series of women.

The woman I came out with, Rochelle Green, I was with her for a couple of years. And then about a year later, I'm—Rochelle had called me up and said, “Oh, let's go to, you know, why don't you come out with us, we'll go out?” I said, “Okay.” And I met at a bar, it was the Third Street bar. And we met—I met Judy Clark who was my, the person I was with, you know, my lesbian partner for the next 13 years, really. And she went through the whole thing with getting beaten,

staying married, getting pregnant, she left and then she came back, and then I decided this is enough. I don't want to be here. And I left the marriage.

Morgan Grey 09:47

What year did you get married? What year was your son—

Pat Cohen 09:50

1963 I got married. My son was born in 1969.

Morgan Grey 09:55

And so the Stonewall Riots happened in 1969. Did that have any impact on your coming out?

Pat Cohen 10:03

Well, it did have a big impact on my coming out publicly and saying I don't have to be here anymore. I mean, when I saw—I remember watching, you know, Channel Five in New York and seeing that the riot—the Stonewall riots were happening that Friday night and Saturday, it was all over the news. And people were being arrested. It was like such an eye-opening experience, I felt so proud that it was happening. And that—wow, this is so, it was beyond my wildest dreams, that something like that could happen, that people could come out and be out and fight the police.

The police would, you know, they would come into every—if you were in a lesbian bar, they would come in and harass you. “Where's your driver's license? What are you doing here?” You know, we had a thing that if you went to a bar, you would be dancing with a woman, and then if police came in, then you'd stop dancing, and the gay men would stop dancing, and the women would stop dancing, and we would dance with a partner of the other sex. You know, it was just like automatic. Everyone knew that's what you did.

And yeah, it was very, it was very freeing. It was very, you know, I mean, at the same time that that was happening, the anti-war movement was happening. So, you know, the Women's Movement was beginning, and then the Gay Movement was beginning. And I was — really felt like I was part of both of them. And that was very, you know, that was enough to say, I don't have to be here anymore. And that was in my marriage.

Morgan Grey 11:40

Okay. You want to tell us more about your coming out?

Pat Cohen 11:46

Well, coming out, I think the thing I wanted to talk about, how difficult it was, not necessarily—I mean, I came out to my husband. But he didn't—either he didn't think it was important, or, you know, two women being together, that's not anything dramatic. It wasn't like I was with a man or

something. I guess he thought that because he really didn't, you know—I led a separate life. But when I did leave him and I was with Judy, I remember we went to visit my parents down in Florida. They were living in Florida. And my son, he was about three years old then, four. And he would stay with them at their place. And Judy and I had a hotel, motel. And I remember my mother calling and say, “Well, what's with you? Oh, you know, what, what is this thing going on with you and her?” Because I was, I wasn't married. But I said “Oh, well, you know”, I was, I felt like it was time to come out. “I'm glad you asked. Her and I, we have a partnership, she's my lover.” Because that's what we called it then. I guess there could have been a better thing. My mother was very much a prude. But that was what we called it. So that's what I said. And she said, “Lover?!” You know, she just got up. “That can't be!” She hung up the phone on me.

And I said, “Judy, I gotta go and see. I gotta go get Jeffrey.” I just knew something was brewing. My mother was kind of like a tyrant to me all my life anyway. So I'm driving up to get to where they were, where they lived. And I see my mother running down the street. She's running towards me. I quickly make a u-turn. “Judy, pack everything, we gotta go. Jump in the car.” She, we just throw everything in a suitcase, we jump in the car, we go, we go up to where they are, and she comes back. And she says—oh, I don't know. She was just hysterical. You know, and she started going after me. I—there was a payphone, I called the police. And they said, “Oh, we can't do anything. It's family.” I guess in 196– '73, in Florida, they don't have to do anything if you're in trouble.

So you know, we got on a—I don't know how we escaped, but we got, there was a bus that came by, we got on the bus, we went to the airport. And you know, I didn't even have—I was in a bathing suit with a cover up. I didn't even have shoes on. And on the plane they said, “Oh, you have to wear shoes.” And I said, “I don't have shoes.” And they went in the back, they found a pair of flip flops and gave them to me. And one of the things that was happening as we were driving in, I saw my parents car go by. You know, we're in the bus, higher, and I see them go by, I go, “Oh my gosh.” But we—after that, nothing happened.

Nothing happened then, but when—after I got home, I got a phone call from my sister. “Dad just called me, mom's coming up and she said she has weapons that can harm.” You know, I don't know what that means. But I call up the police department where I lived. I lived in West Hempstead, Long Island. And they said they would circle. I said, “Listen, my mother is threatening me, she's coming up,” blah, blah, blah. And they said they would circle the block. Then I get a call from my ex-husband, who says, “Oh, your mother just called, she said that, ‘Aha, now we can take away your son.’” And I said—and he said, “But I'm not really interested in doing that. I like the way things are. It's fine with me, but I just wanted you to know.”

So I knew that he—she wasn't getting anywhere there. And then the next day, she had gone up to—Judy was a social worker, she was working in a hospital, clinic, mental health clinic outside the

hospital. And my mother had gone up to the director of the hospital and said, “You have a lesbian working there. And I'm gonna go to the newspaper, and tell them that unless you fire her.” So the director said, “Well, you know, I'll have to get back to you on that.” You know, they didn't know what to do. They, I guess they had to find out what's going on in the mental health clinic. Because it was something that was, you know, a couple of houses down from the hospital. And then Judy, who gets a call from the Director of the hospital, and says, “You know, I told your, your partner's mother, that in 1973, if they have a lesbian working there, we don't really care about that.”

So I felt like she had gotten roadblocks at every turn she went, so she just flew home. And really, I didn't talk to her for the next seven years. You know, I spoke to—my father would call, but then he'd get in trouble if he went down to make a phone call. And so he stopped calling me. And you know that that was about the most horrendous thing that could ever happen. When I tell that story to people, they—I don't know anybody who that happened to, which is why I felt comfortable to do it. You know, I'm not saying that people didn't lose their families and this and that, but I didn't know anybody. So it was, it was very difficult. It was very hard. And it was hard to make up to that.

Morgan Grey 17:13

Yeah. So just to clarify, at that point, your family was living in Florida, and—

Pat Cohen 17:19

Yes.

Morgan Grey 17:19

Still, so you were visiting when the initial episode happened, and you told her that you were lovers with Judy.

Pat Cohen 17:27

Right. Right.

Morgan Grey 17:28

Okay. So what time— When did you get a divorce?

Pat Cohen 17:36

You know, I think it was 1972, we got divorced.

Morgan Grey 17:41

Yeah. And it sounds like your husband was fine with how things were going at that point.

Pat Cohen 17:49

Yeah, he didn't, he knew it wasn't going to work. I mean, I just said, "I'm leaving." You know. Well I mean, I tried a lot of different times to talk about it, but he was just very complacent, and didn't really, you know, get moved by anything. So I—oh, one of the things I did is I called a lesbian organization. I can't remember what the name of it is. But I called a lesbian, you know, like a hotline in Manhattan. And I said, "I'm a lesbian. I am looking, I want to get divorced from my husband, I need an attorney." And they said, "Okay, we'll have to get back to you," you know.

Very shortly after they called and they gave me this attorney's name, Raoul Felder, who I had no idea who he was. But when I went up to this office on Fifth Avenue, it was very posh, very exclusive. And, you know, I found out that he was like, a divorce attorney to the stars, you know, kind of thing. But he was very nice, very good. And he said—I said, "Well, my husband says he's going to kill himself if I leave," which is what he had said to keep me there. I forgot about that 'till just now. So he said, "Oh, don't worry, they all say that [laughs], you know." So, I mean, I laugh because, oh, you know, I didn't know what to say about it. But, and then I, you know, once you go to a lawyer, it's at, it's not in my hands anymore. They'll take care of it. You know, Donald was fine. He saw his son every other weekend and still is a friend, you know, he lives down in Florida near my son. So, you know, no hard feelings. We're at every holiday, Thanksgiving, birthday celebrations. Yeah.

Morgan Grey 19:44

So let's shift to—you're out at— you're living in Nassau County, and you've come out, Stonewall Riots in '69 gave you the feeling of pride and liberation. So let's talk about the lesbian community in Nassau County at that point.

Pat Cohen 20:11

Okay, well, there really wasn't any at that point. But Judy had gone to Smith College and a lot of the anti-war things were happening in different universities across the country. And she would come home and we would talk about what was going on. Oh, it sounded so exciting. And it was it, they were parallel with the Gay Liberation Movement. So we went in 1972, we went to the third, you know, march, Pride March in Manhattan, which was held down in the Village. And it was very exciting, because now we were surrounded by all gay people, lesbians, gays, everything, drag queens, everybody. And it was very—it just felt really good. But nothing was happening in our own town.

We had to come—and we got kind of, got tired of always going into Manhattan to do things and to find things—what's happening. So what we did was there was a women's liberation center in Nassau County. So we went in and said, "Okay, you know, are there any lesbians here?" They go, "Oh, well, I don't know. We don't know." So I said, "Well, we are, so we want to meet

people.” They said, “Oh, okay. Well, do you want to be a committee?” I said, “Oh, yeah. Okay. It will be a committee.” So we got our name put on the board as one of the committee heads. But in the interim, we had met uh, yeah, I guess that's probably how the lesbian consciousness raising group started. So we had a consciousness rais— We had learned consciousness raising, went to WBAI in Manhattan in the big church, and they had like, 700 people there. We had little consciousness raising groups.

Morgan Grey 22:00

Excuse me, what is WBAI?

Pat Cohen 22:03

Oh, that's a radio station. But it's a, it's an alternative radio station. Even back then they had that. And it was an anti-war, was mostly came out of the anti-war movement, and also the gay liberation movement. So we put up a little sign, we put it in the newsletter, con-lesbian consciousness raising group starting, you know, and then we got a couple of calls. You know, they were, they were professional women. They were college students. They were people who would later become famous, you know, and it was a nice group, was 10 or 15 people. And we would talk about different issues. You know, and it was, you know, like I said, it was from 18 to 70.

There was a couple there that were together for 20 years, they lived in Huntington, which was a couple of—in the next county. And they had never met any lesbians before. You know, they had never been, you know, they both worked as nurses at a hospital. And they had never met any other lesbians. And they didn't know any. So it was really an eye-opening experience for all of us. And it changed—from there, I would get calls from the Women's Center. Because I was on the board. And I can remember like this one couple who called, they were young college girls, they were like, eight—just graduated college, 21. And they had just come in. One of them was from Long Island, so they came back. And the other one was from Iowa. It was Becky and Nancy. And they said, “We want to meet lesbians.” So I told them where the bars were, because that's what everybody who had called me prior to that wanted to know. And they said, “No, we don't want to go to the bars.” So I said, “Oh, okay, do you—why don't you come over then?”

So they lived about a mile away from me. So they came over and we chatted. And you know, they really wanted more. They were just by themselves. They never had met any lesbians. So I said, so as they were leaving, I said, “Oh, by the way, I'm having a surprise party for Judy on Saturday night, why don't you come?” and I gave them the details of when it was. So sure enough the party comes, everybody has a great time, there had to be 30 people there dancing, you know, it, just everybody had a great time. And Becky and Nancy are here. And they're kind of huddled in the corner just you know, sitting close to each other, like, you know, watching everything, taking it all in and absorbing it all. And I come to find out later after they leave and

after I speak to them, you know, a couple of days later and they said, “Well, we had also never been around- we never saw women dance together. We had never seen anything like that.” They were exhilarated, they were just so—felt so good.

And about a year later, I get a call. They had moved to, out of Hempstead and they had moved to Valley Stream and they said, “Oh, we're opening up a bookstore on Long Island, in Ra— in West Hempstead,” which is where I lived. And it was just down the street from me about a half a mile. I said, “Oh, what kind of books?” They said “A woman's bookstore.” “Oh, that's great. That's fabulous”; “And we're starting our own business, a silk screening business.” Oh! You know. So I think, not that they weren't going in that direction, but I think, you know, meeting other lesbians and coming out and seeing how many of us were there and happy and, you know, just to be together, I think that was a motivation for them to do something that didn't even exist then, not definitely didn't exist on Long Island.

There were no women's bookstores, they were probably the first one. And their bookstore became, they had their silk screening business in the basement, they lived in the back and the store was in the front. And their store—every Thursday night they had a discussion group, where it was an open house for lesbians to come and it would be about a topic—they had a newsletter, I mean. So that, I like to feel like that—and from that we also had a theater group we started, Long—LILT, Long Island Lesbian Thespians. And one of the women wrote a play. And before you knew it, it was really a multi-topic kind of center. And just down the street another half a mile up the street was, you know, TC and Company, which was the lesbian bar. So there—all of a sudden there was a lot happening. And you know, we were meeting a lot of different people. And it was just a, you know, something that happened that was, you know, a spark that happened. And, you know, yeah, I was part of it. So I felt really good about that. Yeah.

Morgan Grey 26:56

What was the name of the bookstore?

Pat Cohen 26:58

Alternative's Corner.

Morgan Grey 27:01

Do you know about when that opened?

Pat Cohen 27:03

1975.

Morgan Grey 27:07

Great.

Pat Cohen 27:08

Yeah. And it was open till about 1995. It had transitioned, it moved from that space, because Becky and Nancy broke up. And it moved to another storefront, which was just around the corner from my house. And yeah, they—that turned into, it was, there was a bookstore in the front, but it was also, it turned into WACC: Women's Alternative Community Center. So it turned into—it also now, Becky was not, you know, she had the bookstore, but some, there was now a committee running the discussion groups and the activities for women.

Morgan Grey 27:48

Okay, and can we shift directions a little bit, and let's talk about your work at LILCO, and your distribution business and how those things kind of evolved?

Pat Cohen 28:04

Okay.

Morgan Grey 28:04

I think you were early in the non-traditional women's occupations. Talk about that.

Pat Cohen 28:11

Okay. In 1975, I had two friends who had moved to Long Island, Martha and Lucy. And Martha was going to trade school, she was going for carpentry at Nassau BOCES. And she said, she knew I always worked on my car, because I didn't have very much money. So it would mean changing the oil. If something went wrong, I would walk up to the garage where the guy knew me and I would say, "What do I do? I'm hearing a squeak. [imitates noise]." He'd say, "Oh, that's the fan belt." And he'd show me on another car what to do. And I would go home and do it to my car.

So I, you know, it was basic automotive. And Martha said, "You work, you're always working on your car. Why don't you—?" "Why am I working on my car? I'm working on my car because I have no money!" But she said, "Why don't you go to BOCES and you know, learn how to do it?" I said, "Okay." So I called them up. And they said, "Yeah, you know, we're interested, we have a class starting" and they gave me the date. And they said, "Yeah, just come on down." I said, "Okay." So I went down and they were about 20 of us. I was the only woman in the class.

And I remember the instructor Steve Cogan, very nice guy, and the first day—and this happened a lot of times, every time it was the first someplace—he took me to the big grease vat and he said, "I want to show you how to grease the wheel bearing." I said, "Oh okay." So he took his hand, he put the wheel bearing in there and he packed it. I don't know if you know what I'm talking about. But it's, you know, it's something that has a lot of rolls kind of like a roller skate, but you're

packing it so it doesn't, it moves easily. So he did that. He said, Okay, go ahead. So I took the wheel bearing and did the same thing. Packed it tight. He said "Oh, that was very good." I said, "Yeah, well, I have a kid, it's just like changing a diaper, but it doesn't smell as bad."

You know, and he thought that was funny. And really, that broke the ice. And, you know, I got along with the other—I was even older than most of the people because I was about 26 or 27 [correction: 31 or 32]. A lot of the young people, there are a few older people, but most of them were in their early 20s, most of the other guy students. And then when I graduated, I got a call, I got a call from Sears. And I got a call from LILCO. And I got a call from the New York Telephone Company, 'cause they wanted to hire a woman. So this was like the beginning of EEOC. And I didn't really want to work for Sears. And the telephone company. I don't know there was something about LILCO because it was a Long Island company. So I decided to go there, went for the interview, and the guy said, "Okay, very good," you know, I liked the interview, "I'm sure you can do it," you know, "We have an entry-level position", which is exactly—," I mean, that was all I could do, because I only learned the basics, and they were willing to train because they have sophisticated equipment anyway, they would have to train anybody.

So he said, "But you have to work nights." I said, "Wait a minute, I have a son. I don't think I can work nights, I'll have to find out about that." So I go home, I talk to Judy, she said, "Well, we'll work it out. I can work from home, or we'll get—we'll figure it out." So I call him up. And I say, "Okay, I can, I'm gonna take the night job." He said, "Oh, well, we do have a day job open. Would you like that one?" I said, "Well, yeah, I would really like that one." He says, "Well, you won't learn as much." I said, "Well, for the time being until my son gets older, that would be best for me." So I took that job.

And, you know, again, I walked in there that first day and everybody, every—there were people from every department. I felt like I knew how animals in a zoo feel, they would just come to look at me in a unif—my green uniform, with a rag in my pocket and a wrench in my hand. And they would just, you know, they just came to look, they had never seen anything like that. And that happened about, for about three or four months. And then I was just another, you know, mechanic in the garage. Nobody looked anymore, which was great [laughs].

Morgan Grey 32:23

But— how did your career develop at LILCO? Which is Long Island Lighting Company.

Pat Cohen 32:28

Yes, Long Island Lighting Company, which, it doesn't exist anymore. It's two companies merged and bought them out today. I mean, when I retired, I retired from National Grid. So it can't—it morphed into three or four different companies. So what was the question? I forgot. Like?

Morgan Grey 32:47

How did your career develop there? You didn't stay as an entry-level mechanic.

Pat Cohen 32:51

No, I did—I didn't. I was there for about two years. And then I got promoted to second class mechanic. And I did that for about three or four years. And then I got promoted to a first class and I'm in a union. So everything is seniority. And you know, mechanics, like every working group, we work together, you know, if you don't know somebody, something, somebody else does. And if I know something, I'll teach somebody else. So I did that for about 10 years.

But in the interim, one of the women I was dating—she was a younger woman. And she said—she was in school, she was going to Queens College, and she said, “Why don't you come to class with me one day?” I said, “Well, what is it?” She said, “It's a political science class.” “Oh,” I said, “Oh, that sounds like fun. Yeah, I'll go.” So I went. And it was like a wild class. They were arguing from one end of the room to the other end of the room, and they talking about—and I said, “Wow, this is college! Sign me up.” And within a week, I went down and didn't sign up at that college but I had to figure out.

I went to—it was a school really just down the, you know, a couple of miles away from my house, a University, Adelphi University. And they had a— an adult program, and they had a satellite location that I could walk to from my house. So I said, wait a minute, too many things are falling into place. This is going to work out perfectly. And I remember that was the start of it. I went down scared and nervous the first day and really, I didn't—it was very rewarding. And I spent—took me, I took two classes a semester for six years there and then I, after I graduated from undergraduate I went to graduate school for three more years, two semesters a year and I got an MBA. And as soon as I got that, well, as soon as I graduated undergraduate, the company promoted me.

I mean, I would put in for jobs all the time, because I was going to college. And then as soon as I graduated, I got a letter, I got a notice from one of the bosses. He said, he sent me a job posting and said, “I think you'd be good at this.” And it was somebody who had been a boss of mine five years previous. And I put in for the job and I got the job. And it was called the work equipment coordinator. And what I—it was—I was in charge of all the rentals of work equipment, work equipment being, you know, backhoes and trenchers, and, you know, construction equipment.

So the person who had the job before, the rentals that—the year before it was \$600,000. In the year that I did it, I had reduced the rentals to \$300,000. And the way I did this was, I'm a nice person [laughs]. I'm not afraid to talk to people. I knew what I was talking about. Usually the people who had that position, were not in mech—were not in the automotive business, did not

know anything about it. They just, you know, did it by rote. And if somebody called and said, “Oh, no, I can't give that up.” They said, “Oh, okay.” I said, “Well, wait a minute, you haven't used it. I drove by three times, and it was just sitting there.” “Oh, okay. I guess I can give it up to lend to somebody, you know.” So by manipulating people and machines, I reduced it.

So that raises a lot of eyes when you reduce something and it was, you know, like I'm saying it was 1989. And if you save \$300,000, in a company, they notice very quickly. So I did that for a couple years. And after, and while I was going for my MBA, another position came up in transportation, and it was to be in charge of a group that was in charge of the budget, in charge of the rentals, in charge of—it was fleet utilization. So it was, it was a big promotion. And I worked with, instead of just me and my secretary, it was like five or six of us and I worked there for a while and yeah, and that, is that where I ended my career? Yeah, I think it was, yeah.

Morgan Grey 37:02

So when did you retire?

Pat Cohen 37:04

I retired in 1998.

Morgan Grey 37:11

And how old were you?

Pat Cohen 37:12

55. I had the right time, the right time in the company. And I, you know, I looked around and said, there's gotta be—I would look out the window every day when it was a nice day and go, “Oh, God, I wish I was out there.” Because one of the things when you're a mechanic, you're outside all the time. You're up, you know, the garage doors are open. It's nice. It's airy. You sit in an air conditioned office, and somebody's cold and somebody's hot. And you know. So it was, it was—I said there must be something else for me to do. And I—Liz just started acupuncture school. But I still said, she said, “Well, we'll make it, we'll figure it out.” So I retired. And when I retired in 1998, I was the only person I knew who was retired. So I didn't know what to do, what do I do now. So I got, like, two or three months later, I got a job.

I started working for Census 2000. And I did that for a year and a half. I was like, manager of operations. And then after that I said I don't want to do that anymore [laughs]. And I started traveling with a friend of mine who said, “Hey, you know, I'm going on a trip with wilderness volunteers.” You know, it's like a—you volunteer, and you work at National Parks doing, you know, inva—, you know, either invasive plant removal, fixing up the buildings, whatever they want you to do. And I did that for about 10 years or more, like three or four times a year I would do that. And I was also volunteering for literacy, literacy volunteers, and teaching students

English as a second language. And somebody at that organization said, “Hey, I had a job once that you'd be good for.” I said, “Well, what is it?” They said, “Well, I was a Naturalist. I taught outdoor education to kids.” I said, “Oh, I don't know if I'd like—” She said, “Do you want to go see what it's like?” I said, “Yeah, I'll go see what it's like.” So I went, I called—she had called up somebody and said, “Oh, I have a friend here who's interested. Can she come and watch what you do?” They said yes. I went and observed it. And I said, “Wow, that's a great job. I'd love to do that”. Because what it was it was taking kids either doing project adventure or team building, taking them to the woods, colonial programs, which you know, I taught, you know, when they fire, you know, blacksmithing or candle making or, you know, a lot of different things, but I did that for also 15 years.

Morgan Grey 39:55

And where was this, that you worked as a Naturalist?

Pat Cohen 39:58

Also on Long Island, not far—that was in Brookville, so it was about, you know, also like five miles from my house. Very close.

Morgan Grey 40:06

Were you at a park or what was your organization?

Pat Cohen 40:09

And wilderness volunteers, is that—no, they had their own facility. But sometimes we went to a park, if we wanted the beach or something, we went to the, to a park. We could travel because sometimes we did boat, we would go teach fishing. So we would go to, you know, down to the piers and the South Shore and it was a school trip for everybody. I never had the same group twice. So it was like a field trip for schools. No, this is a Naturalist, Nassau BOCES.

Morgan Grey 40:20

Oh!

Pat Cohen 40:20

Wilderness volunteers were going to national parks.

Morgan Grey 40:43

Okay. I was trying to figure out who, who sponsored you as a Naturalist—[crosstalk]

Pat Cohen 40:46

It's the County Education System.

Morgan Grey 40:51

Thank you.

Pat Cohen 40:51

And BOCES does all the specialties that the individual schools don't do.

Morgan Grey 40:59

Okay. So what other kinds of work experiences did you have connected to the lesbian community?

Pat Cohen 41:08

Um, I did—oh, yeah, right, I forgot we were going back to that. Ah. Well, that goes back to being, going to Michigan. In 1978 I went to Michigan, with Becky and Nancy, they were taking their, all their T-shirts, they were silkscreening T-shirts and everything. And they went, and they—and we—I went with them. I had heard, “Wow, there's a place in Michigan, that for one week, there's a thousand lesbians.” I said, “Well, I gotta go there. How do I do this?” So I had a friend who was a, she was a travel agent. And she said, “Well, I can get you a bus. And you could, you know, be the tour guide. And the bus will take you out there. The driver will go to the beach for three days, and then they'll bring it back.” So for \$40 a person, we rented a bus, we got on the bus, we went out there, had a fabulous time, Becky and Nancy were selling this stuff. Came back and I went back the next year. And they asked if I could help at the booth. I said, “Oh, yeah, no problem. I'll help at the booth.”

So while I was there, I was meeting all the other craftswomen 'cause they were in the crafts area. So I met a lot of craftswomen. Becky, the next—sometime that winter, I was going to California to LA, and she said “Will you—I'll pack a little suitcase, will you take it and go to the bookstores out there and see if they're interested in my stuff?” I said, “Well, sure I'll do that.” So I went, I showed, I sold a lot of stuff. And while I was there, there were other craftswomen in the store and they said, “Oh, you're going back to New York. Would you take my— if I make up a sample of stuff, would you take that back?” I said “Well, sure. I'll do that.” And before you know what, I had J&P Distribution, Judy and Pat Distribution. And we were selling women-made products. Women—meaning products that were made by women. Judy Stone in California, in San Francisco, just—it was a whole bunch of greeting cards, jewelry, I didn't have any other T-shirts but books, all different kinds of things that I was taking around the country and selling at different venues, different festivals. And I did that for about six years. But that was for fun, not for too much money.

Morgan Grey 43:40

But I'm sure that still made a difference to all the women whose material, you know, whose work—

Pat Cohen 43:45

Absolutely. Yeah, it did.

Morgan Grey 43:48

[crosstalk] So you were, in a way, part of creating a national network, a nationwide network of artists and craftswomen.

Pat Cohen 44:00

Well there were so many women's bookstores then that you could just take things to, you know, every—if I went to New York and to Michigan, I could take the things from California. If I went to California and Michigan I could take—yeah, it was a lot of different stuff. And there were a lot of activities going on within, you know, the national festival, which was in Bloomington at the time. You know, there was so many women's festivals going on, CampFest. I mean, a lot of them still go, are still going on, but there were things happening all the time.

Morgan Grey 44:32

So let's talk more about your experiences with Michigan, the Womyn's Music Festival.

Pat Cohen 44:38

Yeah. Well, like I said, I went for the first time as a— as an attendee. And I did and then about two years after—the first two years we went I went as an attendee, and then after that, we set up a booth like J&P Distribution booth at the festival. And I did that till about 1984. And then I don't know, I just needed a change. I needed not to do that. So I didn't go back for '85 and '86. And I met Liz [note: Snow] in '87. And she was, she worked for Ladyslipper Music, so they were always there. And she said, “Do you wanna go? I'm going,” she said, she's going to sell. Did I wanna go? And I said, “Well, I haven't been in a while. But yeah, sure, I'll go.” So I went with her. And she was working there. This was 1988 or '89, I think. Yeah. And she was working there in the Cuntree Store. And she said— I remember —Lisa Vogel, the head of the festival, one of the owners at that time, came over and was looking for somebody who could drive a truck. Well, as a mechanic, I had a Class 3 truck driver's license. So I said, “Oh, well, I can drive a truck.” So she said, “I need somebody to go X, Y and Z. I don't even know where it was, and pick up some stuff. Could you do that?” I said, “Oh, sure. I could do that.” Now don't forget, there was no Waze or anything. I had no— Michigan Festival happened in the woods of Michigan. It was—there was nothing around. But I managed to find out where it was. And on the way back, I stopped the truck driver and said, “Do you know where— the festival was near a campground called Whiskey Creek.” So I asked him, “Do you know where Whiskey Creek Campground is?” He said, “Yeah, I'm going there. Just follow me.” Okay, so I followed him and I made my way home. And then they—

Morgan Grey 46:44

Sorry, you said there was no Waze. So there were no, like cell phone-based GPS systems?

Pat Cohen 46:50

Right. There was no way—there was no mapping, they didn't give me a map anywhere. So it was just, yeah, go, go six lights—oh, yeah, one of the things was that what they did was, the festival would put up signs, but the people who lived in that area would take all the signs down. They took down street signs so that you couldn't find out how to get there. So it was very confusing for everybody. But you know, we still found our way home, as we say.

Morgan Grey 47:22

Okay, so you started driving a truck?

Pat Cohen 47:25

I started doing that, that was just that one time, but then they, you know, Liz, they asked if I could work on the crew. And Lisa said, “Yes.” So I just worked on the crew. And we worked on the crew for about three years. And then the coordinators of the crew, Liz was one of the coordinators, but then the other coordinator left. And Lisa said, “Well, who do you think on the crew could be?” She said, “Well, I work really well with Pat, so I think Pat can be the other coordinator.” 'Cause they were two of us, it was a big—you know, they were like 14 people and it was a huge tent that sold, you know, every—not T-shirts, but we sold ice cream, every, everything, you know, anything that you could want there. Camping supplies, food supplies, they had a whole little store for food. And later on they merged with the T-shirts and we sold T-shirts too. And that was a big part of my life. That was, you know, we went for I mean, I went in total for 32 years.

So we actually, after, we didn't go, for three years we didn't go because our grandchildren could only visit us in New York during those three weeks, and Michigan was during three of the weeks that we would go. So we decided not to go and then they decided that they were going to go to sleepaway camp. So it was okay that we— they were gone. So we went back to Michigan and this time we were on the raffle crew. So for the last four or five years of Michigan, we were on the raffle crew. And that was another experience and a lot of fun. I can't, I can't hear you. I can't hear you.

Morgan Grey 49:30

Try again.

Pat Cohen 49:31

Okay, there you go.

Morgan Grey 49:32

Sorry! Is there anything else that we haven't addressed that you would like to talk about at this point?

Pat Cohen 49:41

I don't think so. I think we've covered a lot. Nothing that I can think of except my relationship with Liz, which has been 35 years and 35 wonderful years. And—

Morgan Grey 49:54

So if you were originally, your first long term relationship with Ju—was with Judy, for about how long?

Pat Cohen 50:01

Yes, 13 years.

Morgan Grey 50:04

Approximate years. When? With Judy? [crosstalk]

Pat Cohen 50:09

Oh, that was like 1965 to, yeah, no, it couldn't have been. 1965 to like 1975, 1978. Yeah.

Morgan Grey 50:22

Okay. And then when did you get together with Liz?

Pat Cohen 50:26

Liz, I got together in 1987.

Morgan Grey 50:29

And still going.

Pat Cohen 50:31

Still going, yep. Still in love after all these years.

Morgan Grey 50:36

That's wonderful. How did you meet Liz?

Pat Cohen 50:39

Um, she was working at Michigan. And I mean, I knew her just because she was working for Ladyslipper. So I would see her across the way but, you know, I always said, oh, that's that, you know, those music people. They're such snobs, you know? And so, one day a friend of mine,

Retts Scazillo, was having a festival down in Charlotte, North Carolina. And she said, "Why don't you come? It's going to be a lot of fun." I said, "Oh okay," so I went down there. And there was a mutual friend of Liz and mine, Bonnie Cohen, who was there, and I started talking to her and I look across the auditorium. You know, we walk in and there's this big, not, it's not an auditorium, but prior to going into the auditorium, there's a big room, and Liz is selling T-shirts. And I look over and I say to Bonnie, "Is that Lizzie Snow?" I didn't even know her name wasn't Lizzie. She said, "Yeah." I said, "Wow, she looks, she's beautiful. She looks great." So that was the beginning [laughs].

She's here telling me, "Don't forget about the aura," because that's what I said. I saw a white aura around to her. I mean, for real. It was like, oh, my God, you know, and that was it. That's a sign that something's going on. Yeah. So we would just, you know, we chatted, you know, they had a little dance party in somebody's room. So we went to the room. I wasn't with her or anything. But, you know, I, you know, we just started to talk and chat. And then the next morning when I came out of my room, Liz had come out of her room, a couple of rooms up the way at the same time, so she came over and she started talking to me. And she started talking to me, and then I went to the front desk, and she was still talking to me. And I went to my car and she's still— and I'm saying to myself, does this woman know that she keeps following me around [laughs]?

So it was one of those, oh, this feels good. So she lived in North Carolina in Durham and I lived in New York on Long Island. And Becky and Nancy, they, because they had a bookstore, they said "Oh, I gotta, I have to call Ladyslipper." I said, "Oh, I'll call Ladyslipper for you." But she was, wasn't there. She had just left. Oh, gosh. And then when we went to, we went to the Southern Festival in '87. And, you know, I went with somebody else. I mean, just somebody, a friend I had met. And for breakfast, I'm walking to go to breakfast, and I see Bonnie Cohen. And I said, "Oh, wow, I didn't know you were here, that's fabulous. Is Liz Snow here?" She said, "Yes, she is. Wait a minute, I'll go get her." All of a sudden I see Bonnie running with Liz behind her, you know almost dragging Liz. I said "Oh, hi." So they invited me for breakfast. And we've been having a lot of breakfasts ever since. You know, that's 35 years. Yeah.

Morgan Grey 53:42

That's a lot of breakfasts.

Pat Cohen 53:45

[laughs] Lunches and dinners too.

Morgan Grey 53:49

So, as you look back on your life, and all the amazing things that you've done, what do you think? What do you feel is your most significant contribution to the lesbian community, to society in general?

Pat Cohen 54:12

I think—well, for the lesbian thing, I think it's just being open, being out, being proud, being successful. Not letting anything stop me or anybody else, you know, just, you know, just being there for people, being there for women. I love being with women. 99% of my friends are women. But you know, there are nice, a couple of nice guys that I know. So I think that that is it. I'm just very open, and being a role model. I like to think that was what I was for many years to people. And as far as society I just think the same thing, just being kind and just being open to people and taking risks, not, never letting anything stop me from doing something that I want to do. And I think that was very helpful for me, you know.

Morgan Grey 55:19

So you say that you feel that one of the things that you've contributed is by being a role model. Who would you say were your role models?

Pat Cohen 55:31

Well, I want to say that, you know, like Becky Bly, I've talked about Becky and Nancy and Becky Bly was definitely one of my role models. Because there was somebody who just moved from Iowa, came to New York, opened the bookstore, started a business, you know, like, and she was way younger than me, but just really was determined, confident, you know, love that about her. I want to say, you know, Liz, in so many ways, Liz, what she did to our home, you know, we also worked for Habitat for Humanity for a number of years. And whatever skills we learned there, which we learned a lot, because we would be on top of roofs—we had a, I think, a 20 year, 25 year anniversary, at Habitat for Humanity. And we raised, we invited a lot of friends, it was a woman build, and they allowed us to have this event in our honor. And we raised over \$10,000 for the organization. We had 20 women come and raise the roof of this house, and you know, all the walls, and it was awesome. So I think that—I don't know, why do I start on that?

Morgan Grey 56:54

We were talking about who was your role model?

Pat Cohen 56:57

Oh, my role models. Okay so Liz—and taking all of those back, I mean, she took off the outside of our house and sheet rocked it, put, you know, plywood up and shingle, you know, just amazing thing. So in so many ways, she's one of those people who also, you know, doesn't let anything stop her.

The woman Janet Brown, who now moved down to Gulfport, and Liz here, also, and she's somebody who, again, took me to that class and teaches me all the time, even though she's 17 years younger than me, you know, we can go for a walk and we just chat, chat, chat, chat, chat

and talk about these amazing things. And she's really opened my eyes to many things, you know. And let me think, what else? I, you know the—I had a really good friend, a male friend who—Ronnie, who would stop—he worked for LILCO and he was the mail carrier and I worked nights, and he would come and have lunch with me, or my dinner, his lunch. And I learned a lot about racism from him. And you know, he was African American. And he taught me a lot about that. And we were buddies to the end, he passed away. But we were good friends for many, many years. Yeah.

Morgan Grey 58:35

And when did you actually move to Florida and what precipitated that move?

Pat Cohen 58:41

We moved in 2019. You know, it was just time. We had been to Gulfport, Carol Vitelli, she lives downstairs. She's one of my role models, too. But she's down on—we're on the 10th floor, she's on the seventh floor. But she had a party, a surprise party for her partner. And we all came, she rented a house for her friends and we stayed at the house. And we came to—I walked into her house, looked out the window and I said, “Oh my God, I wanna live here [laughs].” Because it's all—if I showed you what it looked like, it's like just I'm on a bay, you know, St. Pete Beach is across the bay, and—can I take you and show you quickly what it looks like?

Morgan Grey 59:27

Sure! Let's [unclear].

Pat Cohen 59:31

You might move here too! This is what I see. [shows view to camera]

Morgan Grey 59:38

Oh, my goodness.

Pat Cohen 59:39

Can you see it?

Morgan Grey 59:41

Yes, yes—

Pat Cohen 59:42

This is what I see every day. I wake up to.

Morgan Grey 59:46

Is that Boca Ciega Bay?

Pat Cohen 59:48

That's Boca Ciega Bay, yeah. So [unclear] I had never—my parents lived in Florida, my son lived in Florida, but I had never thought I would ever move to Florida until I moved here. Until I saw that and said, “Oh my God.” In New York, we could never afford to live on the water. You know, and just here it was affordable, it was something that we could sell our house and move in and not have a mortgage, you know. And it was just like—and Gulfport is a lesbian paradise, there's many lesbians.

There's—so there's 12 units on my floor, four of the units are lesbians and one is a gay man. And that's pretty much how the building is, it's probably 20-30% lesbian and gay. And every—it's just a, it's like a little old hippie town. Everybody—no it is [laughs]. Everybody is friendly, I can walk to town and be stopped five times talking to people. And I'm only here three years, and they're like, my best friends. You know, it's just that kind of place. So it's what made me move here. All of a sudden, I said, and I loved the work I did and—but I said, Liz, “I don't want to move in my 80s. If we're going to move, I have to move now. Took us a year to clear up the house and get everything together. And here we are. Very happy.”

Morgan Grey 1:01:20

So ov— through over the course of your life, there have been tremendous changes in the lesbian community and the options for living as an out lesbian, you know, from when you were married and inspired by the Stonewall Riots, to creating a community in Nassau County, to now living basically in a very, in a gay centric community in Florida. Can you reflect on just the scope of the changes that have happened?

Pat Cohen 1:02:01

Well, I think it's, it was just an evolution. It was not that I thought that I could never be this way. I mean, I never even imagined that it could be this way. But really just living my life. Living my life, you know, honestly, and who I am, it just, it had to be the destination. Because we weren't just going to move anywhere. If I was going to live anywhere, we moved from a beautiful place, and we loved our home. And we would have never moved. But this is really very special place. And we're very happy. Yeah.

Morgan Grey 1:02:46

Okay, is there anything else you'd like to talk about? Any thoughts you have?

Pat Cohen 1:02:52

No, I just, you know, I look forward to, you know, another 80 years [laughs]. Or a few more years, and, yeah, I feel very much at peace here and very happy. And, you know, I wanna, I didn't say anything about the Lesbian Herstory Archives, but they were—they definitely influenced who

I am. I think I told you, we went to almost every gay, you know, Pride March in Manhattan. And we always marched in the front with the Lesbian Herstory Archives, that we never marched anywhere but with them. Even though there were Long Island groups, there were other lesbian groups, we only march with them because we—I've been to the building a few times, when we had a reunion for Alternative's Corner about, we had a 50th reunion or 40th reunion, we had a, it was a fundraiser for the Archives. We donated \$1,000 to them after the event. Paula Grant is a dear, dear friend of mine, and she's a big part of the Archives. And, you know, I'm just, I think they do great work. I've always been, you know, fond of them. I wish I lived in Brooklyn, so I could be part of their community. But—

Morgan Grey 1:04:19

What caused you to march with them the first time? How did you know about them? And—

Pat Cohen 1:04:26

Well, first of all, you hear the drums beating, you know, you just know it, it's just that that's where you want to be, you know, they would lead the parade, you know, they would lead the parade. You know, maybe the parents of gays would lead the, lead, be first, but they would definitely lead the parade. And not because, you know, they led it but because that was where the women's energy was. And that's where you wanted to be.

Morgan Grey 1:04:57

Yeah, that's great.

Pat Cohen 1:04:59

Yeah.

Morgan Grey 1:05:00

So, okay. Thank you very much. This is last chance, last call. Any other comments?

Pat Cohen 1:05:09

No, no other comments, but you've been great Morgan. Thank you. It's been great meeting you.

Morgan Grey 1:05:14

This has been a pleasure. So thank you, Pat Cohen, and I'm going to stop the recording now. But let's stay on for just a minute afterwards.

Pat Cohen 1:05:25

Great.

